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ABSTRACT

Foreign language listening comprehension instruction too often relies on brief selections read aloud or sporadic teacher talk interspersed with native language (NL) utterances, which fail to provide sustained listening practice. NL is overused for grammar-related talk, reducing target language exposure, encouraging translation, and hindering thought in the target language. In providing input, the teacher should design content built around "caretaker speech" characteristic of mother language. Caretaker speech offers both linguistic and extralinguistic support. Linguistic support consists of a variety of verbal manipulations, including simple vocabulary, simple syntax, repetitions, short utterances, pronoun restriction, exaggerated spacing, slowed speech, exaggerated intonation, and sentence break-up. Extralinguistic supports involve such elements as motor activity, concrete objects, realia, the chalkboard, and dramatization. A classroom presentation about a wallet illustrates the use of these supports to make the content completely comprehensible. Teachers can design materials to supplement or use apart from the text by using and expanding on a base topic. If teachers are to develop an atmosphere for second language talk, they should establish a time for its exclusive use followed by a time for exclusive NL use. Planned input can be reinforced by spontaneous communicative talk in the classroom. (MSE)

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Listening Skill Development Through Massive Comprehensible Input

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Listening comprehension in the foreign language (FL) classroom is an important but elusive goal. Teachers have been talking about it for years, but they have not been sure how to put it in place as something attainable. Our efforts are perhaps best likened to stabs in the dark.

One common strategy is to read a selection aloud and then to ask questions about its contents, an activity which might last some five minutes. A lesson of such duration is better than nothing, but its resulting gains in listening skill development is expected to be severely limited. A more widespread practice is not to plan specific listening lessons at all, but to rely on sporadic teacher talk, usually to elicit a show of students' grammar knowledge. Such talk, often interspersed with utterances in the native language (NL), fails to provide listening practice of a sustained nature.

A contributing factor to this unhappy state of affairs may be our reluctance to come to grips with how much of the FL should be used. I suspect that fundamental to the development of the listening skill, since daily contact time with learners is so limited, is to prioritize use of the FL, the implementation of which will surely require strategic planning. Foundational to that planning will be sustained talk in the FL by the teacher. This means that it will eliminate jumping back and forth between FL and NL, a phenomenon which is not uncommon in secondary school and college FL classrooms. Such intralanguage use tells students it is not important to listen when the FL is spoken since the teacher will probably repeat the utterance in the NL. Furthermore, it places few constraints on the teacher to make his or her talk comprehensible.

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A second and associated cause of extensive NL use is a grammar-oriented syllabus in which grammar-rule talk is central. Some teachers, including myself, have tried to explain grammar in the FL, but with only minor success, since grammar talk necessitates a great deal of abstract language. There are ways to impart grammar knowledge without devoting great portions of classroom time to grammar analysis.

We should be reminded of yet other reasons for avoiding use of the NL. It amounts to that much less time students can listen in the FL. In other words, students learn what they do. If they are to develop skill in listening, they must listen a lot.

NL use has other negative effects. It encourages translation, which hinders students from learning to think in the FL. It likewise encourages the belief that the FL corresponds to the NL, encouraging students to misuse the new language when trying to speak or write. Perhaps more important is that use of the NL wields a negative effect on students' perception of the utility of the course, which emanates from an implicit, or even explicit, teaching philosophy that students, if they will learn the basics (usually implying that they need to enroll in the next course or two) will *later* be able to undergo instruction totally in the FL. It is a futuristic philosophy, which is convenient for taking the pressure off of oneself to deal with instruction in the FL. My experience is that such future prediction or promises to students seldom becomes reality because it is based on the requirement that the students, not the teacher, be responsible for language acquisition.

How then might the teacher proceed? Recognizing the need to provide input, the teacher will design content which is built around caretaker speech (talk characteristic of the way mothers speak to their young children), on which Krashen (1982) so ably reminds us. Caretaker speech contains two important ingredients: linguistic and extralinguistic support.

A number of verbal manipulations characterize **linguistic supports.**

1. **Simple vocabulary.** With beginning learners, *shoe* does the job better than *footwear,* and *take off* is preferable to *remove.*

2. **Simple syntax.** Referring to students and the colors of their clothes, a teacher avoids complex syntax by saying, *Mary's wearing the blue blouse,* rather than *Mary's the one who is wearing the blue blouse.*

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3. **Repetitions.** Generous repetition of a key word helps the listener focus on the sound of that word. It is not uncommon to hear a mother talking to her young child about a live kitten. *Look at the kitty. Here kitty. Nice kitty. Touch the kitty. Kitty's soft. Hold the kitty? Kitty's nice.*

4. **Short utterance.** Short, often incomplete, utterances help make speech understandable to beginners. On a very elementary level (as in #3 above), utterances are extremely brief. At a slightly more advanced stage might be heard: *Mommy'll wipe your face. Make it clean,* which is easier for the developing language learner to grasp than is *Mommy'll wipe your face to clean off all the food stuck on it.*

5. **Pronoun restriction.** Use of names (e.g., Mommy, Teddy) initially facilitates reception rather than *I, he,* etc.

6. **Exaggerated spacing.** Longer-than-normal pauses between phrases and clauses are a natural characteristic of caretaker speech. Exaggerated spacing involved in speech directed to a two-year old, for example, might be represented with slashes as follows: Look at this/It's a cookie/Yum/Isn't it nice/Mommy baked it/for Billy. In contrast, try reducing the spacing to that of normal adult speech and see what kind of reaction you get from the child in return.

7. **Slowed speech.** Beginning FL students, like young NL learners, require a slow-down in speech at times. Caretakers perceive when this is necessary, but they are careful to make the reductions in speed temporary. If habitual, slowed speech could inhibit one ultimately from learning to listen successfully at normal speed.

8. **Exaggerated intonation.** An unusual degree of stress is often used to call attention to key words. In the FL classroom, such emphasis can be used effectively to convey the meaning of interrogatives (e.g., Who? How many?). When used in context, and when given exaggerated stress, interrogative words are easily understood.

9. **Sentence break-up.** Somewhat reminiscent of the backward build-up technique of audiolingualism, sentences might be

temporarily broken for initial comprehension (e.g., I have money/in my wallet).

Extralinguistic supports are somewhat different from linguistic aids. They involve the use of such things as motor activity, concrete objects, realia, (e.g., pictures, posters, maps), the chalkboard, and dramatization. Their combined use with linguistic supports are crucial in helping students understand the oral message.

We turn our attention now to content. Some sample content in barest form, is offered below. To be presented effectively it is to be spoken with generous amounts of linguistic and extralinguistic supports as have been explained above.

Theme: A Wallet

(Time required: approximately 20 minutes)

I have a wallet. It's my wallet. What color is it? It's black (refer to other black objects).

I have dollars in my wallet (holding wallet open to display dollars). I take out the dollars. How many? How many dollars do I take out? Let's count! 1,2,3,4,5. How Many? Five. I have $5.

I have $5 in my hand. I put the dollars in my pocket. How many dollars do I put there? Let's count! 1,2,3,4,5. $5. I put $5 in my pocket.

Now I put my hand in my pocket. I take out the dollars. How many dollars? Let's count! 1,2,3,4,5. $5. I have $5.

What's your name? (Teacher pointing to himself = "TED") What's your name (To student)? Do you have a wallet? Yes, *(name of student)* has a wallet. (or, No, ... doesn't). Take it out! Ah, it's (black). Like the teacher's. (REPEAT WITH OTHER STUDENTS UNTIL FIVE DIFFERENT COLORS ARE USED.)

Who has a red wallet? Right. ..... has a red one. (REPEAT WITH ALL FIVE COLORS)

Let's count the colors! Black—1 color. Brown—2 colors. Etc.

Do you have dollars in your wallet? Yes, *(Name of student)* does. (or, No, ... doesn't). Take out $1. Give it to me. Class, I have $1 in my hand (DO WITH FOUR OTHERS)

Now I have $5. Should I put the dollars in my wallet? No, they're not my dollars. Should I put the dollars in my pocket? No, they're not my dollars. Whose dollars is this? Your dollar? Yes, it's

(*name of student*)'s. Take it. Put it in your wallet. (REPEAT WITH THE OTHER FOUR DOLLARS).

With proper additions of linguistic and extralinguistic supports, this listening content is made completely comprehensible. Furthermore, it is fun for the students, and it is non-anxiety producing in that it demands little or no student speech in the FL, yet, a great deal of learning takes place phonologically, lexically, morphologically and syntactically. For example, nouns (e.g., numbers, wallet, pocket, hand), verbs (e.g., have, take out, put), and adjectives (colors) represent lexical learning, all supported in meaning by extralinguistic devices. Likewise in grammar we see interrogative formation, adjective-noun combinations, pronouns (subject, possessive, object), and formation of negatives which are presented with the aid of both linguistic and extralinguistic devices. To be sure, this listening content is recognition learning, or as Krashen calls it, getting a "feel" for the language (1982). But it forms a solid foundation for learning to listen and understand when an abundance of linguistic and extralinguistic supports are later reduced to more natural use.

What about other content? Where is the teacher to get the materials to present 10, 20, or 30 minutes of sustained listening every day? Hopefully, materials in many languages will be forthcoming, but until they are, teachers must design their own for use apart from the textbook (e.g., the first several days of the semester) and/or for use in supplementing the textbook. For the former, a base topic can be identified. It can then be extended to associated sub-topics. For example, *The Wallet* can be extended to *The Purse,* from which many female students will take their wallets. This in turn will produce a myriad of objects to talk about in different ways. A comb will suggest talk about *hair* in which color, length, consistency (i.e., straight or curly) and a number of motor actions related to it will follow.

Likewise material can be constructed to tie in with the textbook by building comprehensible input around the vocabulary of a given lesson. Responding to a teacher's request for specifics, I opened her Spanish textbook and called attention to the first three words appearing in the vocabulary section of the day's lesson: *ball, record player* and *magazine*. *Ball* might be talked about in terms of its color, form, material, and quality as well as its utility for throwing, catching, bouncing, rolling and the like. *Record player* provides input on its component parts, motor-related actions (e.g., plugging in, playing) and

its utility for dancing, including such activity as swaying, arm and leg manipulation and directional movements. The word magazine promises great potential for talk about its title, cover and content, the latter including description of articles, advertisements, and pictures, any of which can lead to even other associations. Such talk is pertinent as it provides contexts in which one would normally talk in using the new vocabulary.

Finally, a word about the appropriateness of the NL. If teachers are to develop an atmosphere for FL talk, including student talk, it seems reasonable that they establish a time for its exclusive use, followed by a time for exclusive use of the NL. Such an approach gives students security and a sense of direction. Otherwise, seeing no sustained example from the teacher, students may feel no compulsion to speak in the FL themselves.

We have already seen how the FL is handled exclusively by the teacher through large amounts of comprehensible input. Planned input of this nature then can be reinforced by spontaneous communicative talk to the students in the form of varied and sundry comments, directions, requests, congratulating, and the like. The NL, on the other hand, must be severely curtailed but at the same time signaled for use at a set time, the length of which to depend upon the nature of the lesson. Ten minutes, perhaps at the end of the hour, may suffice for questions and answers in the NL on language peculiarities which are causing students difficulties.

In summary, we have seen a rationale for massive use of the FL together with some notions on its implementation in the classroom. It is a concept which has the potential for revolutionizing FL instruction today. It behooves teachers to ponder it, to experiment with it, and to assess its value for developing proficiency in the oral language.

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